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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research with teacher education students was to explore the value of writing reflective journals. Data came from interviews, surveys, and informal conversations with students in an educational psychology course. The students were first asked if writing the journals helped them to reflect on their established beliefs, then whether this assignment led to any changes in beliefs and/or improvement in their ability to understand the perspectives of others, especially with respect to cultural diversity, and finally if the journal experience encouraged them to be more receptive to new approaches. Other issues included whether students found the assignment to be enjoyable, and if it helped the students to function more effectively in the course. Analysis of the data revealed that students enjoyed writing the journals and believed overwhelmingly that writing the journals increased the overall value of the course. Almost all indicated they would consider assigning this type of journal to their future students. Students agreed that the journal writing definitely did assist them in reflecting on their previous experiences and that this made material more relevant to the classroom. Responses were mixed as to the value of the assignment in promoting openness to new ideas, and most students did not find this activity valuable in helping them consider issues from the perspectives of others. (Contains 19 references.) (ND)

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THE USE of JOURNALS to PROMOTE REFLECTION

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Students come to teacher education programs with distinct convictions regarding what makes a good teacher. Therefore, they are often not receptive to accepting new methods to which they are exposed during their courses.

A key task for teacher educators is to assist students in understanding how their previous experiences impact their beliefs about teaching. After researching the "learning to teach" literature Virginia Richardson (1990) indicates that "...improvement of the teacher-learning process requires acknowledging and building upon teachers' experiences and promoting reflection on those experiences."(p.12).

In order to help my students reflect on their previous experiences with teaching, I have them write reflective journals. My basic educational psychology students write approximately one journal each week. The assignment is to respond to issues encountered during the course to which they have strong emotional reactions. They then identify specific experiences in their lives (former teachers, family experiences, friends) that were significant in their development of these beliefs.

The purpose of this research was to gain insight into the value of this activity for the students. The first question was if writing the journals helped the students reflect on their established beliefs. The second was whether this assignment led to any changes in beliefs and/or improvement in their ability to understand the perspectives of others, especially with respect to helping change attitudes toward cultural diversity (Carter, 1995). The third was if the journal experience encouraged the students to be more receptive to new approaches. Other issues included whether students found the assignment to be enjoyable, and if it helped them to function more effectively in the course.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Students come to teacher education programs with from 12 to 17 years of experience having observed and been influenced by teachers (Armaline & Hoover, 1989; Lortie, 1975; Smith, 1994). Therefore, preservice teachers have developed strong opinions regarding teaching prior to their education classes. Holt-Reynolds (1992) states:

> Preservice teachers have spent considerable time and energy ...attempting to make sense out of and account for their experiences as learners...Their conclusions...work behind the scenes as invisible, often tacitly known criteria for evaluating the potential efficacy of ideas, theories, and strategies of instruction they encounter as they formally study teaching (p.343).

These experiences often hinder students from reflecting on and accepting new methods (Bolin, 1988; Buchmann, 1989; Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Smith, 1994; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Preservice students embrace any information they acquire in their courses that reinforces their viewpoints. On the other hand, they tend to reject information which they encounter that is contrary to their preconceptions (Kagan, 1992). Therefore, students often leave their education courses with the same opinions regarding effective approaches to teaching as when they started the classes, with the probability that they have an even stronger commitment to their original perspectives.

John Dewey (1933) indicates that there are three primary sources for student knowledge: beliefs based on emotions, beliefs based on authority, and reflective thinking. Much of the knowledge that preservice students bring to their classes has been established as a result of beliefs based on emotions and authority (Carter, 1995). James Banks (1993) divides knowledge into five categories: personal/cultural, popular, mainstream academic, transformative academic, and school. It is necessary for educators to help students understand the role personal/cultural knowledge plays in determining what they acquire from their teacher education classes (Carter, 1995).

Thus, a key task for teacher educators is to assist students in understanding how their previous experiences impact their beliefs about teaching. This in turn should promote more reflection on new perspectives. Holt-Reynolds (1992) says:

> Until we develop ways to invite our students to share their lay beliefs, ways to understand the implications of those beliefs, and ways to encourage and sustain critical

conversations about those beliefs, we will fall short of actually practicing with our own students the very principles that we are teaching them to employ (p.347).

In this research, student reactions to the journal writing were investigated in order to gain insight into the impact of these assignments. The next section will discuss my methods.

METHODS

My data came from student interviews, student surveys, and informal conversations with students. These students had participated in a basic educational psychology course in which they were required to write eleven journals (two or three handwritten pages each).

In depth interviews were done with six students who were chosen at random. The first question that they were asked was for a general reaction to the journal writing. Follow up questions were then used to clarify their responses to this basic question (Spradley, 1979).

Triangulation is an important procedure in qualitative research (Lancy, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1984). The information gathered from the interviews was compared to that gained from surveys administered to all of my students for the semester (72 surveys) and personal observations (primarily informal conversations).

RESULTS

Students believed overwhelmingly that writing the journals increased the overall value of the course. Several students indicated that the necessity of writing the journals helped keep them on pace with the reading assignments. Almost all the students also felt that they would consider assigning this type of journals for their future students. One interviewee (an extremely creative individual) disagreed with the format for the journals as she felt that they were too structured.

All the students interviewed and the overwhelming majority from the survey agreed that writing the journals did help them to reflect on the classroom material. Comments were made such as "... helped to put the new material into perspective."and "...helped to relate information to actual classroom use."

Regarding whether the reflective writing helped students to be more open to new approaches, the response was split equally with only two of the interviewees agreeing that this was valuable. Slightly more than half of the survey participants agreed that this change had occurred. With respect to the value of this activity in helping to perceive the perspectives of others more fully, none of the interviewees mentioned this and less than half of the survey participants agreed with this statement.

DISCUSSION

As indicated above, because preservice teachers have many years of exposure to models of effective and ineffective teachers, they begin their education courses with distinct convictions regarding what constitutes good teaching methods. Therefore, frequently the value of their education courses is minimal. My purpose for assigning reflective journal writing is to assist my students in recognizing these previous experiences and the corresponding beliefs. Then hopefully this comprehension will help them to be more receptive to innovative approaches. This research was an attempt to gain some insight into the student reaction to these assignments.

Almost all the students enjoyed writing the journals and perceived the journal assignments as valuable in assisting them to learn from the class. This was encouraging since any task will generally be more beneficial if participants have a positive attitude toward the endeavor.

Responses indicated that the journal activity definitely did assist students in reflecting on their previous experiences and thus made the material more relevant to the classroom. This was also encouraging as one of my primary objectives was helping students to apply all of the issues covered during the course to their future classrooms.

Replies were mixed with respect to the value of the assignment in promoting openness to new ideas. However, considering the previous research relating to the lack of success in general in this area (Richardson,1990), perhaps having an impact on approximately half the students should be considered a positive result.

There was some disappointment with respect to the fact that most students did not believe that this activity was valuable in helping them to consider issues from the perspectives of others. However, perhaps it is necessary to redesign the assignment to help to emphasize this issue more adequately.

I believe that this feedback has been valuable to me. I

learned more in general about the assignment. While it was felt that it was important to provide specific structure, perhaps for the creative students more flexibility needs to be allowed for this activity.

While it is necessary to be careful with pretest-posttest designs, perhaps some type of formative assessment would also be valuable as a comparison. Also simply asking students may not be the most effective way of discerning whether they are open to new ideas and able to consider issues from the perspective of others. Therefore, perhaps it is necessary to revise the research format along with making some changes to the structure of the journal writing assignment.

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